

Times editorials that aren't fit to print

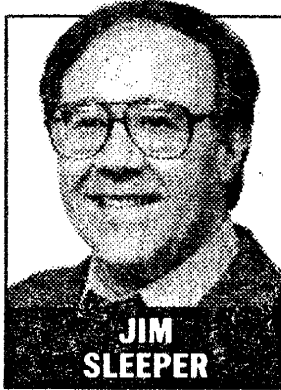
Even if you don't read New York Times editorials — perhaps especially if you don't — you probably assume that they carry great weight in the councils of power. You're right, but have you ever wondered why? Like the Pope, after all, The Times has no troops. Its credibility rests on a community of secular belief and mutual respect among people in politics, industry

and the arts. The editorial page affirms its community's integrity by providing the smart insights and sound judgments upon which busy and powerful people depend. Its clout rests on its readers' dread of losing face in an editorial rebuke guided by standards they're all bound to respect.

But even the strongest communities are fragile crafts in history's tides. They can drift, lose course and be torn asunder. Responsible people are now saying that The Times is drifting, that it is less interested in good judgment than in style and show and shaking things up — as if things weren't already being shaken by forces beyond The Times. Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad; people are saying this about the editorial page's new young Ahab, Howell Raines.

This week's New Yorker takes note of the problem in a profile of Raines that's a bit too soft and admiring. Peter Boyer's apologia is occasioned by a Rainesian bashing of the Clinton administration so harsh and unrelenting that it has made even New York Post editorials superfluous. Is the administration really "the most reckless . . . with the integrity of federal investigations since that of Richard Nixon"? Has its conduct in Whitewater really been "stupid, irresponsible and improper"? So Raines thinks, and even Boyer seems compelled to demur.

The Raines he portrays is a Southerner with an acute case of what I call Willie Morris Syndrome. "WMS" is a craving — named for the Southern writer who triumphed here as editor of Harper's in the 1960s — to come North and conquer by cutting a romantic figure in publishing houses and salons. When Raines, an accomplished and likeable novelist and memoirist, published "Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis" last year, he angled for a promotional spread by sending notes on fine stationery to People magazine's editor. This is "WMS" to the max, and on one level, who cares? But it's fair



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to ask whether a passion to shake up us Yankees belongs at the helm of The Times' editorial page. And whether Raines' bashing of that other conquering Southerner, Clinton, has an edge honed by the adage, "It takes one to know one."

Raines tells Boyer he wants editorials that aren't bogged down in "on the one hand, on the other hand." A man of principle, he believes that "Every South-

erner must choose between two psychic roads, the road of racism or the road of brotherhood." Such moral certitude, Boyer observes, "can come across to other Southerners, even some 'good' ones, as wearisome piety." It strikes some good Northerners that way, too, especially when applied to settings about which Raines knows less than he should.

Though the civil rights movement's evolution should have taught him otherwise, Raines can't conceive that syrupy notions of brotherhood won't get us across today's stormy racial seas. Or that there's a difference between simply banging your drum — and weighing the other side's best arguments as if those you hope to persuade had principles, too.

The latter Raines does not do. Candidate Rudy Giuliani was an apostle of "civic Reaganism" with "no administrative experience" and a fondness for the tactics of Reagan henchman Lee Atwater. All untrue — indeed, all stupid and irresponsible — but, hey, we know where Howlin' Howell stands, and that's what counts.

THE FEDERAL crime bill "deserves to die" because it excludes the Racial Justice Act, and never mind that most of the Congressional Black Caucus voted for it anyway. Raines will keep their consciences. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor practiced "Jurassic Park jurisprudence" by raising hard questions about racial redistricting. Justice Stephen Breyer didn't merit confirmation because Raines saw a "cloud" no one else saw. And on and on.

Such dubious positions make The Times less relevant to real battles under way. Serious people shake their heads and move on. Editorials should take unpopular positions on principle, but not for the fun of playing prophet. The point is to rally a working majority of people who are doing the world's heavy lifting. If that bores Raines, let him find other work.



The Soft Bigotry Of Low Newsroom Expectations

Nearly seven years ago, the editor of The Washington Post Book World phoned to ask if I knew how 12 paragraphs from my June 2, 1996, Post review of Marshall Frady's "Jesse: The Life and Pilgrimage of Jesse Jack-

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son" had wound up a few weeks later in the San Francisco Chronicle under another reviewer's byline.

I was mystified. The Chronicle's reviewer was that paper's deputy opinion page editor. Trying to imagine the heist, I pictured an overeager 26-year-old, in way over his head, writing desperately on deadline.

A more convoluted explanation came from the Chronicle's books editor: Its reviewer had downloaded my Post review to study it but had gone on vacation without finishing his own. The editor, searching for his review, had mistaken some of my paragraphs (mysteriously shorn of my byline and the Post's headline) for his and pasted them in.

That sounds like some of the explana-

tions we're hearing from New York Times editors about the work of Jayson Blair, a young black reporter who cut a devastating swath of mendacity through the newspaper of record before resigning.

When I called the "author" of the Chronicle review for his account, he stunned me: "As an African American, I would never 'lift' a story, because we are already under the cloud of Janet Cooke," he said, referring to The Washington Post reporter who had fabricated her Pulitzer Prize-winning tale of a young boy on heroin. Recovering my voice, I said simply, "I really don't care what race you are." He insisted that his editor's story of a mix-up was true and promised to send me his original version. It never came. And he remained at his post for several more years.

Now The New York Times tells us a task force of editors will review policies and procedures that may have abetted Blair's trespasses and recommend reforms. My bet is that the Times won't report that the real solution is to get rid of "diversity" as we know it and get back to the serious business of real integration.

In an unprecedented, four-page mea culpa on Sunday, the Times described Blair's long record of making editors (and readers) believe he'd covered people he'd never met in places he'd never visited. The Times had published stories by Blair that included material from other

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reporters' work. Worst of all, at least a dozen editors at the paper had looked the other way at his mistakes.

Years ago, in a chapter of my book "Liberal Racism," I told of how signals from the top of the Times were setting the stage for just such a disaster. "Diversity is the most important issue facing this paper," Times Publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. claimed, crusading nationally for color- and surname-coded "diversity"-driv-

en hiring, training and news coverage. It was a moral mission, he said, but a business one, too.

But newspapers risk caricaturing individuals and the subcultures to which they may or may not belong when well-meaning editors try to make the paper "look like America."

Americans certainly don't all see the world in the same way. Neither do differences run unerringly along racial and sexual group lines, as opposed to, say, individual, class or geographical ones. Ironically, the most unmentionable, unprintable truth about "diversity" is that group differences do include some deficiencies owing to legacies of racism. These won't be overcome by being massaged by workplace policies that pretty them up.

If people like Jayson Blair and the Chronicle's reviewer weren't hired or kept on to assuage white managers' moralistic enthusiasm and guilt, there would still be many fine black journalists in American newsrooms. But too many newspapers are driven by corporate policy to finesse the heavy lifting that should have been done for more black kids much

earlier in life, at home and in school.

Professionals can't indulge double standards for the sake of appearances or moral relief. The harsh reality that the soft bigotry of low expectations only worsens is that for every legitimate complaint a black reporter can make about the glass ceiling that blocks promotion, there arises another legitimate complaint by a reporter or manager — black or white — about having gone the extra mile (or two) for a young black reporter with insurmountable skill deficiencies or demons.

When will we begin to acknowledge this sad truth? When you can read this essay in a newspaper that has found the courage to liberate its good reporters and editors, black as well as white, from having to live their professional lives with absurdities like those the Times and the Chronicle sustained.

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